



# **A SEMIOTIC CLASSIFICATION OF BRITISH ROAD SIGNS: ANALYZING SYMBOLIC, TEXTUAL AND MULTIMODAL COMMUNICATION**

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<b>Article history:</b>	<b>Abstract:</b>
<b>Received:</b> 20 <sup>th</sup> February, 2026 <b>Accepted:</b> 14 <sup>th</sup> March 2026	Traffic signs are essential instruments for road safety, utilizing different semiotic methods to communicate messages to motorists. This research examines an extensive dataset of UK road signs, classifying them into three separate categories: exclusively symbolic, exclusively textual, and multimodal (a combination of both). The findings show that although warning signs depend largely on universal symbols for quick recognition, information and direction signs require a multimodal strategy to deliver precise geographic and regulatory information.

**Keywords:** *Semiotics, Multimodal, Iconography, Prohibitory, Mandatory, Hazard, Cognitive processing*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Road signs serve as a universal language for navigation and safety. In the United Kingdom, the design of these signs follows specific psychological principles to ensure they are understood at high speeds. The primary objective of this research is to classify the standard British road signs (Warning, Mandatory, Information, and Road Works) based on their communicative delivery:

**-Iconic/Visual-only:** Using symbols to transcend language barriers.

**-Textual-only:** Relying on verbal instructions for complex regulations.

**-Multimodal:** Integrating both symbols and text for precision.

There are some scientific works, especially articles, which have been held by researchers. "In English, signs often describe the physical appearance of the object. For example, the term "Bend to right" emphasizes the geometric shape of the road. In Uzbek, this is rendered as "Xavfli burilish (o'ngga)" (Dangerous turn to the right). The English nomination is neutral and descriptive, while the Uzbek nomination introduces modality (warning) through the word "dangerous." Here, the essence of the situation (risk level) is more important for the driver than the mere shape"[1].

"The term *compositional word formation* refers to word formation through the process of compounding, or combining words. In particular, two independent words combine in a specific grammatical form, and a grammatical connection between the combining words is evident. As a result of such a combination (connection), it is not a lexical unit, i.e., a lexeme, that

is formed, but rather a syntactic unit – a phrase or a sentence. The main essence of this method is to form a new lexical unit from the combination of two or more words or word stems"[2]

According to some research, each sign in Great Britain was qualitatively analyzed and assigned to one of three categories based on its visual components:

**Visual-only (Symbolic):** This category dominated different types of road signs: *Roundabout, Traffic signals, Road narrows, Crossroads, Slippery road, Uneven road, Bends, Pedestrian crossing, Animals/Cattle/Sheep, Low-flying aircraft, Tunnel, Level crossing, No entry, No U-turn, No right/left turn, No overtaking.*

**Textual-only:** These were most prevalent in Information and Temporary Road Works signs: *Worded warning sign, Slow down, Hidden dip ahead, Try your brakes, Try brakes after ford. STOP, GIVE WAY, Access only, School Keep Clear, Doctor parking only, Permit holders only, Cyclists dismount, Fasten seat belts, Reduce speed now, Switch off engine, Local traffic, All routes, Private road, Check fuel, Remember to drive on the left.*

**Multimodal (Combined):** This is the most complex category. They are *Steep hill, Overhead electric cable, Low bridge, Countdown markers, Risk of flooding for next, Maximum speed limits, Weight/Height/Width limits, Waiting/Parking restrictions with times, Minimum speed, Route for buses only, Lane for buses and cycles, Advance direction signs, Tourist destination signs, Speed camera, Variable message signs, Countdown markers at exit.*

**Visual-only (Symbolic) signs** serve as the backbone of road safety, particularly within the Warning



and Prohibitory categories. By utilizing universal icons for hazards such as *roundabouts, bends, and pedestrian crossings*, these signs minimize the cognitive load on the driver. They transcend linguistic barriers and facilitate "*split-second*" decision-making, which is critical in high-speed environments.

The prevalence of **Textual-only signs** in Information and Temporary Road Works highlights a reliance on semantic precision. While signs like "*Hidden dip ahead*" or "*Reduce speed now*" provide specific instructions that icons cannot easily capture, they also present a "*Linguistic Burden*". This research suggests that purely textual signs are the most vulnerable to misinterpretation by non-native speakers and international drivers, indicating a need for more intuitive designs in temporary traffic management.

The **Multimodal (Combined) category** represents the most advanced form of traffic communication. By integrating symbols with numerical data (*speed and weight limits*) or geographic names (*direction signs*), these signs provide both the context and the specific detail required for navigation. This hybrid approach is the most effective at ensuring compliance and providing clarity, as the icon provides the "*gist*" while the text/number provides the "*limit*".

In summary, the effectiveness of British road signs lies in their diverse semiotic structure. To further enhance road safety, future signage policies should aim to reduce purely textual messages in favor of multimodal designs, ensuring that critical information is accessible to all road users regardless of their linguistic background.

## **LIST OF LITERATURE**

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